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September 11, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

Since February 14, 2019, my office has utilized office space at the Orlando Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in order to more effectively serve military veterans from my congressional district in central Florida. My office shares this space with the office of Congressman Darren Soto. While the Orlando VAMC is located in Congressman Soto's district, it has a catchment area of six Florida counties, which includes my district. In 2018, Congressman Soto and I requested permission from the House Committee on Administration to establish this arrangement. Our request was approved by the Committee in writing on December 13, 2018, whereupon my office worked with staff at the Orlando VAMC to coordinate logistics.

On August 30, 2019, I received a letter from Dr. Richard Stone, the Executive in Charge of the Veterans Health Administration, informing me that—after an internal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) review—the VA had decided that, as of the end of this year, congressional offices would no longer be able to use office space at Veterans Health Administration facilities, including the Orlando VAMC. The same letter was sent to Congressman Soto, as well as to four Members of Congress from south Florida who have a similar arrangement with the West Palm Beach VAMC. It is my understanding that none of us were consulted by the VA prior to this decision, and the decision came as a surprise. I am writing to request that you reconsider this decision.

Based on the experience to date, my office's use of the Orlando VAMC provides a significant benefit to the veterans I represent. There are more than 35,000 veterans in my district, many of whom rely on the Orlando VAMC for their medical care. Currently, nearly one-quarter of the casework my office conducts pertains to veterans' issues. Having a part-time office inside the Orlando VAMC gives veterans in my district—many of whom are elderly or disabled—a convenient location at which to seek assistance from my office on a range of federal issues. Instead of veterans having to travel to one of my two permanent district offices in downtown Orlando or Sanford, our VAMC office offers these veterans a convenient location they may visit before or after attending their medical appointments.

Caseworkers on my staff currently use the small shared office space on Thursdays, and we receive an average of 25 to 30 walk-in appointments each week. Veterans seem very pleased with this arrangement, and my caseworkers regard it as effective. The VA's unilateral decision to prohibit this arrangement, without giving me or other Members of Congress an opportunity to explain its merits, strikes me as unwise.

For the reasons stated above, I respectfully ask that you reverse the decision to prohibit the congressional use of office space at VHA facilities. My office will be reaching out to you to arrange an in-person meeting on this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steph', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Stephanie Murphy
Member of Congress

cc: Dr. Richard Stone, Executive in Charge, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs